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State Historical Society preserves Sen. Abdnor's legacy

PIERRE, S.D. -- Former South Dakota U.S. Senator James Abdnor passed away Wednesday, May 16, in Sioux Falls. But thanks to a donation Abdnor made several years ago to the South Dakota State Historical Society, his legacy will be preserved for future generations.

In 1993, Abdnor donated his congressional papers to the State Historical Society-Archives at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The Abdnor collection consists of his official correspondence, newspaper clippings, photographs, audio and video recordings, speeches, and other records documenting his time as a U.S. Senator and as head of the U.S. Small business Administration. An individual research room in the State Archives is now called "The Abdnor Room" and contains several Abdnor memorabilia.

"The Abdnor papers are a significant collection detailing his political career and are a valuable resource to researchers," noted Chelle Somsen, state archivist. "His donation of his papers and the historic significance included in those records is invaluable to the state's citizens."

Abdnor, born and raised in Kennebec, held a long and distinguished political career, beginning with his involvement in the South Dakota Young Republicans and the National Young Republicans.

Abdnor served on the Public Works, Veterans Affairs and Aging Committees while in the U.S. House of Representatives. While U.S. Senator, he served on the Appropriations, Environment and Public Works, and Joint Economic Committees. Every year that Sen. Abdnor was in Congress he won the Watchdog of the Treasury award because of his dedication to reduce the deficit. He advocated for rural water development while on the Environment and Public Works committee and authored the Water Resources Development Act of 1986.

Abdnor served as first assistant chief clerk of the South Dakota House of Representatives in 1951, 1953 and 1955. He then became State Senator from 1956-1968, serving ten years as chairman of the Joint House/Senate Appropriations Committee and President Pro-tempore of the South Dakota Senate from 1967-1968. In 1968 he ran a successful campaign to become the 30th Lt. Governor of South Dakota from 1969-1970, serving with Gov. Frank Farrar. Abdnor was elected on November 7, 1972 to the 93rd Congress, U.S. House of Representatives and later re-elected to the 94th, 95th and 96th Congress.

In 1980 Abdnor challenged the incumbent senator, George McGovern, and won a decisive victory. He was defeated in the 1986 U.S. Senate general election by Tom Daschle.

In December of 1986, President Ronald Reagan nominated Abdnor to head the U.S. Small Business Administration. He retired in 1989.

The State Historical Society-Archives contains photographs, maps, government records, personal and organizational records, newspapers and library resources that document the history of the state. Donations are accepted. Public hours are 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. CDT Monday through Friday and the first Saturday of each month. For more information about the State Archives, see <http://history.sd.gov/archives> or call (605) 773-3804.



Editor's Note: The attached publicity photo of the late Sen. James Abdnor was taken for the 94th Congress, in 1975-76. (Photo courtesy South Dakota State Historical Society-Archives)

-30-

The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council, and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.